

A Pragmalinguistic Analysis of Superstitious Expressions in German: Speech Acts of Warning, Consolation, and Confidence Building

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the speech functions of superstitious expressions warning, consolation, and instilling confidence from a pragmatic perspective. Drawing on J. L. Austin & J. Searle's speech act theory, Brown and Levinson's politeness strategies, Grice's cooperative principle, and Fillmore and Wierzbicka's cultural script concepts, the study examines German superstitious expressions through illustrative dialogues. Findings show that such expressions serve as communicative tools to regulate the listener's psychological state, reduce anxiety, and provide motivation in interaction.

Keywords: Superstitious expressions, speech acts, warning, consolation, instilling confidence, politeness strategies, pragmatics, German language.

INTRODUCTION

Superstitious expressions formed among people namely, oral forms related to various good and bad omens and beliefs serve as distinct communicative devices in interaction. They often possess a formulaic character, functioning as social conventions in specific contexts, and are expected to produce certain perlocutionary effects (practical impacts). For example, upon hearing unexpected good news, one may immediately say “let it not vanish,” or, to avoid tempting fate, warn “do not step too

firmly.” All of these rely on particular cognitive scripts and cultural beliefs, as observed in our research.

In the works of J. L. Austin and J. Searle, speech act theory emphasizes that utterances are not merely vehicles of information but instruments of action. [16] Austin divides speech acts into three components:

1. **Locution** (the linguistic structure and lexical meaning of the utterance);
2. **Illocution** (the intention behind the utterance the act performed by saying something);
3. **Perlocution** (the effect produced on the listener or the outcome generated) [5].

For instance, the utterance “I warn you, do not do that!” has a locutionary form of a simple imperative, its illocutionary force is the act of warning, and its perlocutionary effect may be that the listener refrains from performing the action.

The concept of IFID (Illocutionary Force Indicating Device), introduced by Searle, refers to indicators that signal the illocutionary force of an utterance. For example, in German, the verb “I warn” conveys its illocutionary force through intonation and modality.

Searle classifies speech acts into five main categories:

1. Directives
2. Expressives
3. Commissives
4. Representatives
5. Declarations [16]

A warning is an attempt by the speaker to prevent or caution the listener, and thus belongs to the category of directives where the speaker seeks to influence the listener’s actions through commands, requests, or warnings [15]. Consolation, on the other hand, is typically an expressive act, as the speaker conveys sympathy, reassurance, or encouragement. Instilling confidence may appear as a commissive (e.g., in the form of a prayer or

promise, where the speaker assumes commitment to a positive outcome) or as an expressive (e.g., expressing hope or good wishes). In practice, it often combines both features.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

E. Goffman introduced the concept of “face” in communication, describing the individual’s effort to maintain social reputation. [1: 5-46] Brown and Levinson distinguish between two types of face: positive face the desire to be approved and respected by others; and negative face the desire to remain free from imposition or pressure [17: 345-358]. Each demand, criticism, or warning typically constitutes a face-threatening act (FTA). For example, the warning “Do not do that!” infringes upon the listener’s negative face (the right to act freely). Therefore, in Brown and Levinson’s theory, politeness strategies are employed to mitigate FTAs.

- **Bald on-record strategy:** the utterance is expressed directly, e.g., “Be careful!” often used among close relations or in urgent situations.
- **Positive politeness:** the speaker appeals to the listener’s positive face with sympathy or encouragement, e.g., “Don’t be upset, everything will be fine” [6].
- **Negative politeness:** the speaker respects the listener’s freedom, softening the demand with requests or explanations, e.g., “Perhaps... it might be better not to do that?”
- **Off-record strategy:** the utterance is indirect, expressed through irony, proverbs, or hints, e.g., “Let’s not awaken trouble” – which is essentially a warning.

Examples of these strategies are illustrated in the dialogues below.

According to Grice’s cooperative principle, participants in communication should speak in a manner that is clear and cooperative, expressed through four maxims: quality, quantity, relevance, and manner [3: 41-58]. Superstitious expressions sometimes deviate from these maxims. For instance, *Regen am*

Hochzeitstag bringt Glück ("Rain on the wedding day brings luck") is literally illogical, but its implicature conveys the speaker's intention to console and encourage [11].

Superstitious expressions are often rich in presuppositions. For example, the warning "One should not tempt fate" presupposes the belief that fate can indeed be tested. According to relevance theory, such expressions are effective when the cultural meaning behind them is accessible and significant to the listener, thereby achieving communicative success.

Superstitious expressions frequently rely on frames (cognitive scenarios) and cultural scripts. As Ch. Fillmore noted, each word or phrase evokes a particular scene frame [4]. For instance, "Knock on wood" (German: *auf Holzklopfen*) evokes the ancient practice of knocking on tree trunks to ward off evil spirits when mentioning good fortune [12]. A. Wierzbicka's cultural script theory suggests that each language community embeds unique moral rules and norms within texts. In German society, norms such as "Do not speak loudly about personal luck" or "Do not dazzle others" underlie expressions like *Sag das ja nichtzulaut!* ("Don't say that too loudly"). Similarly, *Gottwirdesfügen* ("God will arrange it") reflects religious cultural scripts of fate and divine support.

According to Bartminski's axiological profile theory, superstitious expressions embody cultural attitudes toward values [14]. For example, certain symbols are consistently considered "good" (stars) while others are "bad" (black cats), reflecting deeply rooted cultural associations.

In German, superstitious expressions often employ modal particles to signal illocutionary force. In warnings, particles such as *bloß* and *nur* convey categorical prohibition. For example, *Mach das bloßnicht!* ("Don't you dare do that!") emphasizes the seriousness of the warning [7]. The emphatic use of *ja* in warnings recalls commonly known rules, e.g., *Sag das ja nicht!* ("Don't say that!"). In consolations, particles such as *schon* and *ruhig* encourage calmness and reassurance. For instance, *Eswirdschongutgehen* conveys "It will surely be fine," reducing anxiety. Similarly, *Du kannstruhigschlafen – esspuktnicht* (You can sleep peacefully it's not haunted) reassures the listener.

German also employs repetitive forms (trisagion structures) in prayers and wishes. For example, *Allerguten Dinge sind nicht vier, sondern drei* (“All good things come not in fours, but in threes”) implies a positive outcome, as does the practice of knocking three times or repeating *Hu* thrice.

Warning-related superstitious expressions primarily serve to signal danger, ward off the “evil eye” or spirits, and caution against prohibited actions. The speaker’s illocutionary goal is to draw the listener’s attention to potential risks or to dissuade them from certain actions. For instance, when someone excessively boasts of their luck, Germans immediately warn, *Man soll das Glück nicht herausfordern* (“One should not tempt fate”) [10]. Such warnings are often expressed in imperative forms. The following table presents an analysis of five typical superstitious warning expressions still actively used in German today.

Expression DE	Gloss UZ	Function	Illocution	Perlocution (goal)	Strategy	Frame	Semantics	Axiology (sign/value)
<i>Man soll das Glück nicht herausfordern.</i>	<i>Tagdirni sinamastik kerak.</i>	Warning	Directive (advisory tone)	Encourage precaution – urge vigilance.	Indirect, in the form of a proverb; use of “man” (“one”) avoids direct “you,” presenting it as a general rule.	“Testing luck” frame: Luck may vanish if not handled carefully; belief in spirits being provoked.	Luck – positive (but fleeting); Excess – negative (punished).	Stylistically neutral, widely understood; common in both literary and spoken language.
<i>Man soll den Tag nicht vor dem Abend loben.</i>	<i>Kun yakunlanm ay turib, maqtama.</i>	Warning	Directive (ironic)	Prevent premature rejoicing – caution.	Indirect – proverb style with elements of negative politeness; emphasis on <i>vor dem Abend</i> implies “wait, don’t rush.”	“Do not conclude before results” frame: Danger may appear at the end. Implicature: It is too early to draw conclusions.	Early praise – negative (bad omen, spirits); patience, completion – positive (safety).	Everyday speech often shortened: “Nochnichtvora bendloben.”
<i>Verschreies nicht!</i>	<i>Ustidan churq etma!</i>	Warning	Directive (request/prohibition)	Prevent jinxing by speaking of good fortune – warning.	Imperative tone + negation; linked to <i>verschreien</i> (“to jinx by overpraising”).	“Spirit” frame: Belief that naming good fortune aloud may destroy it. Presupposition: Evil forces may overhear.	Good event – fragile, easily ruined; Silence – positive (preserves); unnecessary praise – negative (taboo).	More common in spoken than literary language; typical in friendly conversations; universally understood across German speakers.
<i>Sag das ja nicht (laut)!</i>	<i>Bu gapni (baland) ayta!</i>	Warning	Directive (command)	Discourage uttering taboo words – warning.	Imperative; emphatic <i>ja</i> conveys strict prohibition. Adding <i>laut</i> stresses avoidance of loud speech.	“Taboo word” frame: Belief that naming something may cause it to happen; prevents jinxing.	Loud utterance – negative (invites spirits); silence or secrecy – positive (safe).	Use of <i>ja</i> particle is a German-specific feature; no notable regional variation.

The expressions in the table above serve warning functions in German and produce several perlocutionary effects. For example, by saying *Man soll sein Glück nicht überstrapazieren* ("One should not overstrain one's luck"), the speaker attempts to stop the interlocutor from boasting excessively, encouraging modesty. As a result, the listener may limit their behavior or respond humbly with "Alright, I understand." Expressions such as *Beschreies nicht!* or *Verschreies nicht!* also serve as signals to those present.

In an office, two colleagues are conversing. One (S) is pleased with the early success of a new project. Informal tone.

- S: *Endlich haben wir den Auftrag bekommen! Jetzt kann doch nichts mehr schiefgehen.* (Finally we got the contract! Now nothing can go wrong.)
- T: *Man soll den Tag nicht vor dem Abend loben. Machen wir lieber ruhig weiter und freuen uns am Schluss, ja?* (One should not praise the day before evening. Let's calmly continue and be happy at the end, alright?)

In this dialogue, T politely warns his colleague. He first uses the proverb *Man soll den Tag nicht vor dem Abend loben* as an indirect warning [8]. The illocutionary force here is advice/warning, with the IFID (Illocutionary Force Indicating Device) being the proverb itself (intonation is low, advisory tone). The implicature is that S should not rush and remain cautious. Then T adds *lieber ruhig weiter*, using the modal particle *ruhig*. This conveys a softening tone: "no need to panic, let's proceed calmly."

In another case, a husband and wife are talking in the evening. The husband (S) speaks about how well things have been going before a trip. The wife (T) follows traditional beliefs. Informal, intimate style.

- S: *Unser Auto hat in letzter Zeit gar keine Panne gehabt. Ich glaube, die Fahrt morgen wird super!* (Our car hasn't broken down at all lately. I think tomorrow's trip will be great!)
- T: *Pssst, sag sowas nicht so laut! Nicht, dass du es verschreist. Klopflieber auf Holz.* (Shhh, don't say that too loudly! Don't jinx it. Better knock on wood).

In this dialogue, T's first reaction *Pssst* is a paralinguistic IFID calling the listener to silence. Then T prohibits repeating the statement with *sowas nicht so laut*. Here, the word *sowas* adds slight mitigation. The illocution is warning. The second sentence *Nicht, dass du esverschreist* carries an implicature: if S does not remain silent, "luck will flee in fear." T relies on the "spirit" script the belief that speaking of luck may "strike it down" [9] Finally, T advises *Klopf auf Holz* ("knock on wood"), formalizing the warning and offering a perlocutionary solution (warding off evil).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

These dialogues show that warning expressions serve to draw the listener's attention to danger and are often spoken openly only when social bonds are strong.

The most effective pragmatic method in warning functions is direct signaling, but in a polite tone. In German, combinations of modal particles (especially *bloß/nur* and *ja* together) exert strong influence. They act as powerful IFIDs, prompting immediate listener reaction. For example, *Geh ja nichthin!* ("Don't you dare go there!") is stronger than a simple *Geh nichthin* ("Don't go"), with *ja* intensifying the prohibition to mean "under no circumstances." However, overly explicit warnings are not always accepted. Older generations understand them well, but among younger people they may sometimes be dismissed as "superstition." Yet, even young speakers often use such expressions jokingly. For instance, instead of "Don't jinx it!" they may say *Sag es nicht, sonstverschreien wir's* ("Don't say it, or we'll jinx it").

Consolatory (reassuring) superstitious expressions usually function to reduce anxiety, neutralize the negative meaning of bad omens, or soften the impact of unpleasant events. These expressions rely on the principle of reversed belief turning a typically negative situation into a positive one to calm the listener. For example, if someone breaks a glass and becomes anxious, others immediately say *Wo Scherben fallen, ist Glück nicht fern* ("Where shards fall, luck is near") [13]. Or if someone is frightened by a nightmare, they are reassured with

Träumesind Schäume (“Dreams are illusions”), meaning “your dream is not real, don’t worry.”

Consolatory forms are often positive declarative sentences or soft commands/requests. For instance, *Eswirdschongutgehen* (“Everything will be fine”), where *schon* semantically conveys reassurance: “surely, it will turn out well.” Similarly, *Nurruhig, halb so schlimm*. (“Just calm down, it’s not that bad”) uses *nur/ruhig* to reduce anxiety. Another common phrase is *Wirdschonwieder gut* (“It will get better again”), used to comfort the sick or those feeling down.

The following table presents more than five consolatory superstitious expressions actively used in contemporary German, along with their pragmatic features.

Expression (DE)	Gloss (UZ)	Function	Illocution	Perlocution (Effect)	Strategy (Politeness)	Semantics & Frame	Axiology	Variability
<i>Es wird schon gutgehen.</i>	<i>Baribir yaxshi bo' ladi.</i>	Consolation	Expressive (hope)	Reduce anxiety – instill belief in positive outcome.	Positive politeness: encouragement with <i>schon</i> particle; speaker reassures with “it will be fine.”	“Good ending” frame: belief that things end well.	“Good” – positive (success inevitable); negative situation – temporary.	Standard literary and spoken usage; common in everyday oral encouragement.
<i>Halb so schlimm.</i>	<i>Yarim darajada yomon xolos.</i>	Consolation	Expressive (reassurance)	Minimize negativity of the event – provide comfort.	Affirmation “not terrible at all”; positive politeness: sharing listener’s concern, downplaying problem.	“Not big” frame: problem is small; presupposition: event is not serious.	Event – not too bad; disaster – denied (not terrible, natural).	Used in all dialects; short phrase in conversation.
<i>Schon gut / Ist schon okay.</i>	<i>Hozir hammasi yaxshi.</i>	Consolation	Expressive (affirmation)	Reduce irritation or forgive – calm listener.	Speaker affirms “everything is fine,” eliminating worry; <i>schon</i> conveys “anyway, it’s fine.”	“Still fine” frame: despite mishap, situation remains good.	Problem – minimized (no longer relevant); state – positive.	Informal style; common among close relations, e.g., “Schon gut, Schatz.”
<i>Glück im Unglück gehabt.</i>	<i>Omadsizlikda omad bor.</i>	Consolation	Expressive (mixed cheer/criticism)	Find positive aspect in negative event – reassurance.	Positive strategy: speaker highlights good side; even in misfortune, some benefit exists.	“Every evil has good” frame: disaster overcome is itself luck.	Luck/happiness – relative; disaster – negative but survivable.	Fixed German idiom; situational use (e.g., after surviving an accident).
<i>Pech im Spiel, Glück in der Liebe.</i>	<i>O'yin/kartada omadsiz – sevgida omadli.</i>	Consolation	Expressive (encouragement)	Point to alternative success – lift spirits.	Comforting loser by suggesting compensatory luck.	“Balanced fortune” frame: belief that luck is not equal in all areas.	Losing in one domain – not entirely bad.	Highly idiomatic; very widespread.

Consolatory expressions clearly serve to support the listener's positive face. In situations where the listener is anxious or embarrassed, the speaker signals with such expressions: "I understand you, and everything is fine" [2]. For example, saying *Halb so schlimm* ("Not so bad") minimizes the seriousness of the event equivalent to telling the listener "you did not make a big mistake, don't worry."

At home, a mother (T) and her son (S). The son accidentally drops and breaks a mirror, becoming frightened (due to the superstition of "seven years of misfortune"). The mother comforts him. In formal setting.

S: *Mama, der Spiegel... er ist zerbrochen! Jetzt hab' ich sieben Jahre Pech, oder?! (Mom, the mirror... it's broken! Now I'll have seven years of bad luck, right?!)*

T: *Aber nein, halb so schlimm. Sieh mal, Scherben bringen Glück! Kehren wir's zusammen und vergessen die Sache, okay? (No, not at all. It's not that bad. Look, shards bring luck! Let's sweep it up and forget about it, alright?)*

In this situation, T uses several consolatory strategies. First, *Aber nein, halb so schlimm* applies denial + minimization emphasizing that the event is not serious (*aber nein* conveys "actually, everything is fine"). Then T introduces a well-known superstition: *Scherbenbringen Glück* ("Shards bring luck"). The illocution here is consolation, aiming to prevent S from feeling upset about breaking the mirror.

The effectiveness of consolatory superstitious expressions largely depends on how well they foster a sense of solidarity between speaker and listener. The most effective strategy is positive politeness sharing the listener's feelings and offering support. For example, saying *Träume sind Schäume* ("Dreams are illusions; don't worry, everyone has such dreams") helps the listener feel relieved. In German, the use of softening particles such as *schon*, *doch*, and *mal* is particularly effective. For instance, *Es geht schon wieder gut* ("It will be fine again") or *Wird schon klappen* ("It will work out") convey hope through *schon*. If the listener is anxious, expressions like *Du*

kannstruhig... (“You can calmly...”) signal reassurance: “don’t hesitate, everything is fine.”

Superstitious expressions with the function of instilling confidence and encouragement

This functional group includes expressions that provide positive motivation, wish for good fortune, or point to favorable omens. They serve as prayers, wishes, or sources of psychological support. When using such expressions, the speaker may express a wish, make a promise, or offer a blessing in their own name.

For example, when a friend is about to take an exam, one may say *Du stehst unter einem guten Stern* (“You are under a lucky star”), encouraging them with confidence. This conveys the speaker’s firm belief in the friend’s success. Similarly, before a sports match, a coach might say *Mit Gottes Segen wirst du erfolgreich sein* (“With God’s blessing, you will succeed”). In this case, religious blessing elements express confidence in victory.

The religious component may be explicit or implicit: words like *Segen* (“blessing”) or *Schutzengel* (“guardian angel”) make the religious aspect explicit. Expressions of instilling confidence often employ metaphors or figurative language stars, angels, God, and similar images. Such expressions are usually not commands but rather exclamations, declaratives, or wishes.

The table below presents several widely used motivational expressions in German along with their pragmatic features.

Expression DE	Gloss UZ	Function	Illocution	Perlocution (Motivation)	Strategy	Frame & Semantics	Axiology (Good/Bad)	Variability (Usage)
<i>Du stehst unter einem guten Stern.</i>	<i>Sen yaxshi yulduz ostida turibsan.</i>	Instilling confidence	Expressive (encouragement)	Convince the listener that luck is on their side – inspire confidence.	Speaker expresses belief in listener’s success.	Astrological traces – belief that birth star influences fate.	Goodstar – positive omen.	Rare in formal speech, but used for poetic or intimate effect.
<i>Die Sterne stehen gut (für dich).</i>	<i>Yulduzlar seni qo’llab turibdi.</i>	Instilling confidence	Expressive (hope)	Emphasize favorable current situation – reassurance.	Compliment implying “the universe is on your side.”	Astrological belief: star alignment determines success.	Favorable stars – positive.	Often humorous or romantic tone.
<i>Mit Gottes Segen wirst du erfolgreich sein.</i>	<i>Xudo yorlaqasa, ishimiz o’nlanadi.</i>	Instilling confidence	(Prayer/ Wish)	Blessing for success – spiritual support.	Speaker invokes God’s support, giving strength to listener.	Religious worldview: divine blessing ensures ease of success.	God’s blessing – positive.	Used openly in religious/family contexts.

<i>Du schaffst das schon!</i>	<i>Sen buni uddalaysan albatta!</i>	Instilling confidence	Expressive (assurance)	Express trust in listener's ability – motivation.	Direct praise: "you can do it, I believe in you."	Speaker conveys full trust in listener's capacity.	Listener's strength – positive.	Very common everyday encouragement; informal, across all ages.
<i>Heute ist dein Glückstag!</i>	<i>Bugun sening omad kaining!</i>	Instilling confidence	Expressive (joyful)	Suggest today is especially lucky – cheerfulness.	Speaker conveys happiness, shared optimism.	Belief that certain days are luckier; contrast with "bad days."	Lucky day – positive; unlucky day – negative.	Used in spoken language, cheerful tone; sometimes humorous.

The confidence-instilling expressions above are directly linked to the concepts of luck and goodness. For example, two friends (S and T) are talking before an important interview tomorrow. S is nervous and lacks self-confidence. T encourages him.

- S: *Ich weiß nicht, ob ich den Job kriege... Ich hab solche Angst, zu versagen.* (I don't know if I'll get the job... I'm so afraid of failing.)
T: *Kopf hoch, du bist ein echter Glückskind! Die Sterne stehen gut für dich – du schaffst das schon, glaub mir!* (Keep your head up, you're truly a child of fortune! The stars are aligned for you – you'll succeed, believe me!)

In this dialogue, T uses several motivational expressions. First, *Kopf hoch* is an imperative meaning "lift your head," i.e., "don't be sad, my friend." Then T praises S as *echter Glückskind* ("a true child of luck"), implying he is fortunate and will not fail. Finally, T says *Die Sterne stehen gut für dich* ("The stars are aligned for you"), using an astrological metaphor to suggest that the universe supports him.

Situation: A director (T) addresses a group of actors backstage. It is premiere night, and everyone is nervous. Formal, motivational tone.

- T: *Meine Damen und Herren, gleich geht's los. Denken Sie daran: Aller Anfang ist schwer, aber wir stehen unter einem guten Stern heute. Ich drücke Ihnen allen die Daumen – toi, toi, toi!* (Ladies and gentlemen, we begin shortly. Remember: every beginning is difficult, but today we are under a lucky star. I wish you all success – toi, toi, toi!)

In this collective speech, T employs several types of motivational expressions. The proverb *Aller Anfang ist schwer* reminds them

that beginnings are difficult and anxiety is normal. Then *wirstehenuntereinemguten Stern* reassures the group with a positive omen.

Using confidence-instilling expressions requires caution. If spoken sincerely, they provide strong psychological support; if forced or superficial, they may sound empty. Therefore, the speaker should add genuine belief and emotion intonation, serious gaze, or cheerful tone.

CONCLUSION

The warning, consolatory, and confidence-instilling functions of superstitious expressions form an interconnected pragmatic set. All of them serve to regulate the psychological state of participants in communication:

- **Consolation** softens the impact of negative events or omens, reducing fear or anxiety.
- **Instilling confidence** calls for positive expectation, deliberately “activating” luck, and motivating the listener.

Sometimes these functions appear sequentially. For example, friends are walking in the forest at night. Suddenly the wind blows and trees creak. One interprets it as a bad omen and becomes frightened. First, the other warns: *Nur keine Panik, mal den Teufel nicht an die Wand*. Then he consoles: *Es ist nur der Wind, halb so schlimm*. Finally, he cheerfully instills confidence: *Weißt du, Eulen in der Nacht – gutes Omen für uns!* In this short example, all three processes are visible. In everyday communication, people often first warn against possible danger (“Be careful, don’t stumble”), then console if misfortune occurs (“It’s not so bad, don’t worry”), and finally express a positive wish for the future (“Next time you’ll surely be lucky”). Thus, these functions complement one another and alternate in communicative practice.

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